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ABSTRACT

A review of National Assessment of Educational Progress findings presents a picture of the reading attitudes of a large segment of the American population, and of the relationship between reading attitudes and reading performance. The findings show that a negative attitude toward reading exists, and that it increases with each year spent in school. High reading performance, on the other hand, appears to be related to a positive attitude toward reading, kindergarten attendance, homework being assigned and completed, and higher levels of parental education. Many students have problems with reading that contribute to their negative feelings toward reading, such as a lack of comprehension skills. Poorly given reading assignments also contribute to students' negative reading attitudes. Teachers can help students find some worth and value in reading, thereby improving their attitude toward reading, by (1) involving students in only meaningful learning activities, (2) making accommodation for the varied ability levels of the students, (3) using written materials in the same way as any other instructional materials, and (4) avoiding the problems students have in comprehension. (HOD)

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READING: A "TOP TEN" ACTIVITY

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READING: A "TOP TEN" ACTIVITY

A Paper presented at the Southeastern Regional
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November 5, 1985
Nashville, Tennessee

Dr. Bruce Gutknecht
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INTRODUCTION

With increasing numbers, adults are turning to something besides reading for leisure-time activity. How many hours have you spent in reading for pleasure during the past month, six months, or year? How many books, fiction or non fiction, have you read during the last year? Do you and/or many of your friends turn to reading as a "top ten" leisure-time activity?

Think about your students in school. For how many of them does it appear that reading is pleasurable? True, a lot of reading goes on in school--learning to read in the primary grades and reading to learn in later grades. It is assumed that students read a lot outside of school, too, as part of their homework or preparation for the next day's schoolwork. Does any of your students' reading appear to be done for pleasure? Given time and opportunity would your students choose reading for pleasure as a "top ten" activity?

Perhaps some insight into the reading behaviors of adults can be found in the use of reading in elementary and secondary schools. It is the purpose of this paper to explore "liking to read" in terms of attitudes towards reading, why some/many people (students and adults) don't like to read, motivation for learning and liking to read, and some promising practical practices.

All of this has to do with "valuing reading," that is, finding value or something worthwhile in reading. This of course leads to the

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shaping of one's attitude towards reading. Thinking, caring human beings don't spend much time with activities or involvements in which they find no value or worth, or to put it more plainly, where there's no pay-off. In a television commercial, popular in the early 1980s, for a fast food chain, a senior citizen repeatedly asks, "Where's the beef?" Well, if there is no beef, or it doesn't appear to be quickly forthcoming, this senior citizen won't hang around long waiting. So it is with your students. If there's no beef, no pay-off, no value or worth in reading, they won't hang around long.

ATTITUDES TOWARDS READING

It is generally believed that many people have a negative attitude towards reading. In an effort to determine whether this belief is based on fact, a review of National Assessment of Educational Progress(NAEP) findings was undertaken using the NAEP Information Retrieval System.

Since 1969, the NAEP has interviewed and tested more than one million young Americans--9-, 13-, and 17-year-olds, as well as young adults. While probability samples number only 2500 for each group, results can be generalized to an entire population.

The following findings present a picture of the attitudes towards reading of a large segment of the American population, and of the relationship between reading attitudes and reading performance.

Reading and Attitude

01. More than half of the students assessed preferred movies to either television or reading. Almost half of the 17-year-olds selected reading a book as their least favorite choice of activity.

02. The proportion of students who enjoy reading "very much"

drops from 81% for age nine, to 50% for age 13, to only 42% for age 17.

03. More students value reading as a source of information than as a source of enjoyment, self-understanding, or culture.

04. Almost all children in the 1979-80 assessment of reading and literature recognized the value and utility of reading.

05. About 10% of the surveyed students at each age do not read at all in their spare time.

06. More than a quarter of the teenagers assessed say it is usually hard for them to finish a book they have started.

07. Most students believe reading is important and enjoy it at least "somewhat". However, less than half of the 13-year-olds and 17-year-olds enjoy it "very much".

08. A third to more than half the teenagers have problems concentrating on their reading, finishing classroom silent reading in time, finding books of interest to them and reading long books.

09. About one student in six, at each age, has difficulty finding a book on a subject that is easy to read.

10. Most students think they are good readers (Reading, Thinking and Writing: Results from the 1979-80 National Assessment of Reading and Literature, 1981).

11. At each age, most students--59% of the 9-year-olds, 72% of the 13-year-olds, 75% of the 17-year-olds--indicated that they spent none or less than one hour per day reading for their own enjoyment.

12. Most students--95% at age 9, 98% at ages 13 and 17--thought it is very important to be able to read, but the percentages who

enjoy reading very much decreased with age (Reading Comprehension of American Youth: Do They Understand What They Read?, 1982).

From these findings, it could be concluded that a negative attitude towards reading does indeed exist, and that it increases with each year spent in school. The following findings provide insight into the relationship between reading attitude and performance.

Reading Attitude and Performance

01. For each age, one or two hours per day of reading for one's enjoyment appears to be associated with higher performance than no reading or less than one hour of reading.

02. The student most likely to read with comprehension tends to: think reading is important, enjoy reading, read for enjoyment almost daily, watch television moderately, spend some time on homework daily, and have attended kindergarten.

03. At all ages, those students who responded that they liked the passages clearly performed higher in reading than those who were undecided or who disliked the passages (Reading Comprehension of American Youth, 1982).

From these findings, it is evident that those students who enjoyed reading and thought that it was important, both indicators of a positive attitude towards reading, had higher reading performance.

Three other factors, although not related directly to the topic of this paper, emerge from the NAEP data. Higher reading performance appears to be related to kindergarten attendance, homework being assigned and completed, and higher levels of parental education.

While there are several variables involved in the development of an attitude towards reading that are outside control of the school,

what goes on in school often contributes to the development of a negative attitude.

REASONS WHY PEOPLE DON'T LIKE TO READ

Usually, people don't like to be involved in something with which they have problems. Many students have problems with reading. This of course contributes to their negative feelings towards reading.

A major reading problem many students(and adults) have is lack of comprehension. If people don't find meaning from what they're reading, they won't hang around reading very long because they view it as a useless endeavor, they don't find any pay-off, value, or worth in it.

A list of frequent difficulties students have in comprehension includes:

01. The student may regard "word calling" as synonymous with reading
02. The student does not read for a well-defined purpose
03. The student may not distinguish the central idea from details
04. The student does not sense the author's purpose
05. The student does not follow the author's organization
06. The student encounters so many strange words that the passage means little
07. Ideas are introduced which are entirely outside the student's experiences
08. The student fails to relate what s/he reads to the experiences s/he has had
09. The student has difficulty with the complexity of sentences

10. The student does not visualize the situations described with word pictures
11. The student does not understand figurative expressions and subtle meanings used by the author
12. The student cannot locate, master, and apply to any given topic or problem the pertinent information contained in a selection
13. The student cannot weigh evidence and draw valid inferences and conclusions
14. The student cannot interpret special materials such as maps, graphs, tables, and diagrams(Shepherd, 1978)

Many of these problems stem from the way reading is taught and from the way reading assignments are given. Many teachers, and parents alike, believe that if a student can "say the words" correctly, that comprehension must follow. This, in fact, is not the case. There is no direct correlation between "saying the words" and comprehending. The continued application of reading instruction based on a "bottom-up" theoretical model of the reading process certainly contributes to this problem.

What is worse, is that students are led to believe this same thing. Have you ever heard a student, unable to answer a question posed by the teacher, say, "But I read the book!" "Reading the words" and comprehending are not the same thing. Is it any wonder, then, that students who "read the words" and find no meaning develop a negative feeling about reading?

Regarding reading assignments, Herrold Herber(1978) in his book Teaching Reading in Content Areas describes the "assumptive teacher." A typical assignment given by the "assumptive teacher" sounds

something like this, usually given at the end of the class session when the students are leaving the room, "Read Chapter 13 for tomorrow and answer the questions at the end of the Chapter."

The teacher assumes that the student 1)can find the book, 2)find Chapter 13, 3)read Chapter 13, 4)answer the questions at the end of Chapter 13, and 5)comprehend the concepts contained in Chapter 13. This teacher places the responsibility for teaching on the textbook and the reading of the textbook, instead of taking the responsibility for teaching him/herself.

No wonder kids learn to dislike reading. They find no value, no worth, no pay-off.

Do your students ever see you reading for pleasure? Do you share your reading with your students? Do you read to your students?

The home environment isn't much of a help either. How many reading materials are provided in many of the homes of your students? How many students witness the good model of seeing their parents reading and enjoying reading? Does reading appear to have value or worth in the homes of your students?

Unless your students find value or worth or pay-off in reading, they will quickly develop a dislike for reading.

MOTIVATION FOR LEARNING AND LIKING TO READ

Motivation is one of the most difficult, but most important, tasks for any teacher.

Kids usually experience the "hard sell" when it comes to attempts of teachers and parents at motivation. The "hard sell" sounds something like this, "You better do your homework, or you won't be able to...," or "You better get good grades or you won't be able to go to college," or "If you don't do well in school, you'll never get a

good job." Teachers often sound the same way with "hard sell" attempts at motivation like, "If you don't read Chapter 13 and answer the questions, you won't go on the field trip," or "You must study more or you won't be able to pass the test."

These and other "hard sell" approaches are really counter-productive and usually result, especially for the less-able learners, in great dislike for school and learning and reading.

Kids are people and people don't stick with something very long unless they find value or worth or pay-off in it.

The pay-off is MEANING. Students must find meaning in their reading. They must find meaning and application in their learning in order for them to find value, worth and pay-off.

This is the "soft sell." Make every learning activity meaningful for even your least able student. Make every reading assignment meaningful, not for you or the curriculum, but for the kids.

How can you do that? BY HELPING YOUR STUDENTS AVOID THE 14 PROBLEMS STATED ABOVE.

SOME PROMISING PRACTICAL PRACTICES

To improve your students' learning and their reading, which will result in your students finding value, worth, or pay-off, and thereby improving your students' liking to learn and read and lead to a positive feeling on their part, the following general suggestions should be considered:

01. Involve your students in meaningful learning activities only. They must be able to see clearly the purpose for and value of each activity in order for them to gain meaning(the pay-off). This is true for small, routine activities as well as major activities.

02. Make accommodation for the varied ability levels of your

students. For your less-able learners, smaller pieces of learning/reading with very specific purposes are required. The tried and true DRA(Directed Reading Activity) approach is highly recommended, especially for your less-able learners.

03. Assume nothing with regards to "reading to learn." Only your most-able learners will be able to read text material and comprehend it without your direction.

04. View and employ written materials in the same way you would use any other instructional materials--as tools or resources which support YOUR instruction.

05. Avoid(or at least don't contribute to) the problems students have in comprehension listed above.

Learning and reading must be seen as having value or worth in order for them to be liked by your students. If one or more of the problems or suggestions presented makes sense to you, TRY IT OUT! If only one thing works, you will have found value or worth in <u>your</u> participation today.

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